

HIGH SELF-ESTEEM AS A COPING STRATEGY FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

By

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ABSTRACT

Children with learning disabilities are found in most schools. Learning disability is a widespread issue in today's society. A learning-disabled child is one whose achievement is less than his expected level of achievement despite having average or above average intelligence. Learning disability is nothing but a condition that affects the ability to perform basic academic skills such as reading, writing or arithmetic. Since the lives of learning-disabled students tend to revolve around their disabilities rather than their abilities, their self-esteem is unrealistically low. Consequently, their self expectations, levels of aspiration and general motivational levels get unnecessarily diminished.

Self-esteem is the personal evaluation of oneself and the resulting feelings associated with the self concept. It is a personal trait that can be improved by any person willing to commit himself or herself to the task of positive self development. High self-esteem helps to build strong convictions and optimistic attitudes. It makes a person self-motivated and ambitious and open to new opportunities and challenges. Self-esteem can be considered as a coping mechanism for learning-disabled students to accept their disability and to strive for positive self development. Hence it is necessary for such pupils to be motivated and encouraged to deny the fact of their disability and to rise high in life.

Keywords: Learning disability, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, Self-esteem, Self-concept.

INTRODUCTION

There are some individuals who find it difficult to learn without special care. This difficulty in learning is observed mostly in academic areas such as reading, writing or arithmetic. Children with such problems may be slow learners, average learners or even gifted ones. Also they may have normal hearing and vision. But they may lack the ability to acquire the basic academic skills. These children are ignored in the classroom due to lack of skills and may be often considered to be lazy, inattentive or stupid by their teachers.

The difficulties that children face in the learning process have begun to attract serious attention. It has become a real educational handicap and a widespread issue in today's society. It is important to note that most of the children receiving special education in recent years are those with learning disabilities. These children suffer from severe learning problems in the same way as experienced by mentally handicapped children or physically handicapped children in terms of their mental

abilities or physical abilities respectively. They may be disabled in learning in spite of the availability of all the conventional learning styles and socio-cultural opportunities. Consequently, their self expectations, level of aspiration and general motivational levels get unnecessarily diminished. It has a negative bearing effect on the self-esteem of such children.

Learning Disabilities

One of the objectives of school education is to impart the knowledge of 3 Rs – Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic. But in most schools, it can be found that there are certain students who have learning disabilities which impact the ability to learn the basic skills of reading, writing or arithmetic (Vashistha & Bhardwaj, 2006).

Learning disability is the most recent addition to the categories of special education. Among students with disabilities, learning-disabled is the largest group currently being identified and provided special education services. Students with learning disabilities may be identified at any age, but most of them are first noticed in

early elementary school grades. (Ysseldyke et al, 1998). There are different kinds of learning disabilities. Most often they fall into three broad categories namely dyslexia (reading disability), dysgraphia (writing disability) and dyscalculia (numerical disability). These are called specific learning disabilities. They are specific in the sense that each of these disorders significantly affects a relatively narrow range of academic and performance outcomes (Mangal, 2007).

Learning disabilities are problems that affect the brain's ability to receive, process, and analyze or store information. These problems can make it difficult for a person to learn as quickly as someone who isn't affected by learning disabilities (Lakshmi, 2008). Often learning disabilities are described in terms of the specific domain that is affected. They are described in a number of ways, depending on the perspective and purpose of the analysis.

Children with learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in using spoken or written language. These may be manifested in disorders of reading, writing or arithmetic. Children with learning disabilities face a host of academic and non-academic difficulties. Non-academic difficulties include motor problems, perceptual problems, phonological processing difficulties and language problems. Academic difficulties include problems in reading, spelling, writing, and mathematics. In addition to these primary characteristics of learning disabilities, there are also secondary consequences of learning disabilities such as little motivation, low self-esteem, less self-efficacy and poor metacognition (Karanth & Rozario, 2003).

A misconception that was quite prevalent in the past but quickly dying out as a result of research and spreading awareness is that a student with a learning disability lacks in intellect. The fact is that children with learning disabilities are as smart and in certain cases even smarter than their peers. Learning-disabled children have intelligence in the near average, average or above average range. But they are unable to acquire and use information efficiently because of weaknesses in memory, attention,

perception, language and motor skills. According to Tandon, children with learning disabilities have an average IQ of at least 90 to 110 (Saravanabhavan, 2008).

Even though a learning disability may occur with other handicapping conditions or environmental influences, it is not the direct result of these conditions or influences. The learning-disabled have significant problems in developing academic skills that are not due to handicapping conditions such as sensory impairment, mental retardation and social or emotional disturbances (Panda, 2007). The symptoms of learning disabilities manifest in one or more of the areas such as reading, spelling, written language, visual and auditory processing, mathematical computation and problem-solving etc. These symptoms include slow reading and writing, poor handwriting, reversal of letters and numbers etc.

Self Esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth, or the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes, or likes him or herself. It is generally considered as the evaluative component of the self-concept, a broader representation of the self that includes cognitive and behavioral aspects as well as evaluative or affective ones. It is a favorable or unfavorable attitude towards the self. It is the sum and substance of one's feelings and thoughts about who we are and as such is of great importance. It is the foundation that one builds the rest of his or her on. Self-esteem reflects one's overall evaluation or appraisal of his or her own worth. Psychologists usually regard self-esteem as an enduring personality characteristic. Self-esteem differs from self-confidence and self-efficacy, which involve beliefs about ability and future performance.

Self-esteem, or one's sense of worth, is often fragile and sensitive to events that happen on a day-to-day basis. Self-esteem can be either implicit or explicit. Implicit self-esteem refers to a person's disposition to evaluate himself or herself positively or negatively in a spontaneous, automatic, or unconscious manner. It contrasts with explicit self-esteem, which entails more conscious and reflective self-evaluation.

Self esteem is a concept of personality and for it to grow, one needs to have self-worth. Self-worth would be sought from embracing challenges that result in the showing of success. Level and quality of self-esteem, though correlated, remain distinct. Level-wise, one can exhibit high but fragile self-esteem or low but stable self-esteem. However, investigators can indirectly assess the quality of self-esteem in several ways - in terms of its constancy over time stability, in terms of non-contingency or in terms of implicitness.

Self-esteem exerts a powerful influence on people's expectations, their judgements about themselves and others and their behaviour. People with high self-esteem generally enjoy a great deal of self-confidence and have a realistic assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. In contrast, people with low self-esteem are generally less willing to put their ideas about themselves to the test and are never convinced of their self-assessment (Prema & Raja, 2005).

Self-esteem reflects the extent to which persons develop an attitude about themselves. It is something experienced as a part of, or background to, all of the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions. It is affected by a wide range of influences that range from formative childhood experiences in relation to one's standards or ideals. Lack of self-esteem and a negative self-image are reflected in failure-oriented people who downgrade themselves. Repeated failures in the school years exert one's most damaging effects on self-esteem (Martin, 1977).

Closely associated with a person's needs of adequacy and social approval is the need to feel good about oneself and to feel that one is worthy of the respect of others. Although other people's reactions may influence one's self-esteem through feedback and social comparison, the person himself is the final authority of his own self-worth. Self-esteem receives continual nourishment from a feeling of competency in areas that gain social approval (Coleman, 1970).

Learning Disabilities and Self-esteem

Difficulties from learning disability can cause problems in

self-esteem. Students who experience significant difficulties in learning despite the fact that they are intellectually bright as their peers may lose self-esteem through continued difficulties and failures in the classroom. The day-to-day difficulties experienced by students with learning difficulties may give rise to emotional disturbance. They may often become very frustrated and lose motivation because of their continual struggles with learning. Low self-esteem may be a consequence of enduring learning difficulties and failing to achieve academically at any age level (Hannell, 2006).

Peterson and Edward (1991) while studying student behaviour, self-esteem and academic achievement among regular and special education students found that the learning-disabled displayed significant behaviour problems compared to the regular education group. A study conducted by Blake and Timothy (1989) reveals that children with learning disabilities have less self-esteem compared to children without learning disabilities. Use of a self-esteem scale to study the verbal skills among students in general education, students with learning disabilities and those with mild or moderate handicaps respectively revealed significantly lower self-report scores for the subjects with learning disabilities (Debra & Schell-Frank, 1989).

Self-esteem is a critical factor for an individual's academic achievement, learning motivation, emotional well-being and social adjustment. While studying the effects of inclusion of students with learning disabilities in academic and non-academic activities on self-esteem, it is found that school-based activities and community-based activities make the students feel good about themselves and increase their self-esteem (Chang & Rose, 2002). Snowden and Caulhon (2003) while studying the effects of inclusion on the anxiety and self-esteem of special education students in the regular classroom found that self-esteem could support academic success and could help to improve instruction for special education students, particularly those enrolled in inclusive classrooms.

High Self-esteem as a Coping Strategy

Self-esteem determines the extent to which individuals see themselves as competent and satisfy their needs. High self-esteem helps one to feel better about themselves. Those with high self-esteem are more likely to value their looks, abilities and so forth. Psychologists have studied that academic achievement can be boosted by raising self-esteem with positive images. It helps one to succeed through positive mental attitudes. Thus boosting a child's self-image may also boost school achievement (Myers, 2002). A child with a high self-esteem considers himself or herself as worthy of other children. Only such children can take advantage of education and improve themselves (Prema & Raja, 2005).

Research continually shows a drop in self-esteem through transition from elementary to middle school. Miller and Lee (2002) in their investigation found that a learning environment which is learner-centred results in higher self-esteem. While studying the academic success among at-risk students during the transition from elementary to middle school, self-esteem is found to be a significant factor for school success (Robert & Todd, 2002).

Self-esteem is the personal evaluation of oneself and the resulting feelings associated with the self-concept. Thurman and Fleming (2000) on their findings from student interviews reveal that academic self-concept of ability may produce a more positive correlation between academic achievement and self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem is a capacity to see oneself as valuable and competent and having certain unique talents and a worthwhile personality. According to Berne and Savary (1991) self-esteem is enhanced in children when they know that they have sufficient capacity to accomplish a task. Children with healthy self-esteem are usually self-confident which make them successful.

Healthy self-esteem is an essential component for learning. Regardless of age, the self-esteem of a learner facilitates learning. Learning is growth - intellectual, physical, psychological, social, spiritual and combinations of those. In every aspect of this learning process, there is a potential to maintain or increase self-esteem. Self-esteem in most students 'mirrors' the

appraisals of others, in particular parents and teachers. Teachers' views clearly affect learners' achievements. Positive appraisals over an extended time tend to increase the level of learning.

Learning disabilities should not be regarded as an indication that an affected child cannot succeed against the achievement of some of history's most famous personalities (The Hindu, October 30, 2008). Some great men like Albert Einstein, Thomas Alva Edison, Walt Disney etc had learning disability in their school days and later on they rose to the peak of excellence in their respective fields. Thus positive attitudes about oneself can help cope with learning disabilities.

Children who believe in their own competence and effectiveness and who have an internal locus of control cope better and achieve more than those with a helpless, pessimistic outlook. Facing failure, children with high self-esteem sustain their self-worth by perceiving other people who also fail. The children at this level are able to function well in inter-personal situations. Thus they develop the desire for achievement and competence, reputation and prestige (Aggarwal, 1994).

Recommendations

Ignorance about learning disability is very much prevalent and does a lot of harm through delay in intervention. Parents, teachers, administrators and educational planners at all levels have a great role to play in the minimization of difficulties in learning. Parents need to abstain from finding fault with their children when they lag behind in their studies and they must find out with the help of experts what hampers their progress. Their knowledge of the learning difficulties that their children face will go a long way in the creation of a congenial environment for these children to boost their self-confidence and raise their self-esteem.

There is so much pressure on a child these days to catch up with the rest of the class that learning-disabled children become the victims of their parents' anxiety to avoid their children being considered dunces. The parents have to accept the fact that their children must be left to learn at their own pace because it is no good pushing them

beyond their capacity. They should identify the innate potentialities of their children and encourage them to develop their potentialities to the maximum extent possible.

Teachers have a much more important role to play in moulding the mindset of children with learning disabilities in such a way as to enable them to convert their challenges into chances for the balanced development of their psyches. Instead of calling them as 'lazy', 'dull' or 'stupid', they must understand that each child is unique in his or her abilities or talents. By using special skills of students who have learning disabilities, there is less focus on the disability. It helps to improve the self-esteem of students and increase their productivity level. So, it is imperative that a teacher identifies the potential abilities of these students.

By choosing materials and activities suited to their level of learning and by stimulating their urge to bring out their best, teachers can help the pupils with learning disabilities to turn their difficulties into special opportunities to be model achievers. When this category of pupils experience success, their self-confidence level is raised along with their self-esteem which in turn makes it easy and feasible for them to find their way for the attainment of their goals.

Teachers need to provide their students with positive role models and consistently treat individual differences and needs with patient acceptance and special effort. They can bring to the attention of their pupils the anecdotes from the lives of great personalities like Thomas Alva Edison, Albert Einstein, Beethoven etc., who in spite of their special difficulties in learning like dyslexia, dysgraphia or dyscalculia and so on rose to achieve their spectacular goals in their careers as scientists, mathematicians, philosophers or statesmen. There needs a healthy interaction between the teachers and parents to identify the special needs of these children.

Educational planners and administrators have to exercise great care as they go about their work of planning educational programmes or framing syllabi because they need to be on the guard not to leave out any segment of educational consumers. Inclusive education

entails the formulation of plans and policies designed to cater the special needs of learning-disabled children as well. Educational administrators need to execute appropriate strategies to enhance the self-esteem of pupils whose morale tends to be lowered by their peculiar difficulties in learning.

Conclusion

What is needed in the ultimate analysis to overcome disability on the academic front is a positive image of oneself which alone sustains one's sense of one's own worth. The preservation of this sense alone helps one to hike one's self-esteem which in turn contributes to academic success. Recognition of a pupil's learning disability at home and in school and the creation of a congenial atmosphere helps the disabled learner to lessen the severity of his or her disability. Societal attitude also matters later when such a learner is in the process of coping with his/her learning difficulties through their own efforts supplemented by those of their parents, teachers and their peers.

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